



## ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

## English Literature

### EXPLORING TRAUMA IN CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S BEFORE WE VISIT THE GODDESS

**KEY WORDS:** trauma, diaspora, postcolonial studies, feminist analysis, feminism, cultural trauma, dislocation, women's writing

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#### ABSTRACT

In the novel *Before We Visit the Goddess*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni vividly presents the life experiences of three generations of women through the characters—Sabitri, Bela and Tara. While navigating from rural Bengal to urban Kolkata and the United States, the novel depicts these characters struggling with various issues, including identity, migration, and gender within the Indian diasporic context. In the novel, Divakaruni presents a case of personal and cultural trauma originating from diverse sources such as patriarchy, migration and dislocation. In this article, we have explored various characters by employing a feminist theoretical framework, based on Hélène Cixous's concept of 'écriture féminine' (which means women's writing) and postcolonial discourse. The analysis of the novel shows how these brave women fight against the patriarchal societal norms and march towards self-empowerment despite all the hurdles and pressures from society. By analysing the novel's narrative structure, cultural interactions and resistance against patriarchal societal norms, the article highlights characters' grit, determination and resilience against the societal norms. Through this discourse, the novel gives more profound insights into the connections between gender, identity and culture and how they influence each other across cultures and geographies.

#### INTRODUCTION

In the novel, *Before We Visit the Goddess* (2016), Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni narrates the story of three generations of women, Sabitri, Bela, and Tara. Through the different stories, each character is shown to be struggling with personal and cultural issues. This novel profoundly portrays how trauma is not restricted to the affected generation only, but is also passed down across generations. The novel further displays that the sources of trauma may range from gender discrimination, migration, and broken relationships. This trauma is not only shaped by personal pain but also by other societal issues, including patriarchy and cultural displacement. By employing feminist and postcolonial theories, we can understand the women's ordeals that lead to personal and cultural trauma among the characters.

The novel narrates the story of Sabitri, the grandmother, who grows up in rural Bengal but has dreams of getting educated. However, these dreams are not easy to fulfil; she has to face many difficulties, with dreams of being educated. She was disappointed and publicly humiliated by her lover Rajiv, whom she loved and trusted. He exploited her and broke his promise to educate her. Therefore, her trauma begins very early after her lover abandons her. This trauma will haunt her forever, even after becoming a successful businesswoman, she keeps the emotional scars of her past. These past emotional scars even affect her relationship with her daughter, Bela. This is how trauma is not restricted to only one generation, but also affects future generations, shaping how people relate to each other (Caruth, 1996).

The second character in the novel is Bela, Sabitri's daughter. She is very reactionary towards her mother's strict nature. Because of Sabitri's strict attitude, she runs away to the United States with her lover, Sanjay. When she emigrates to the US, while it is an escape, the new place also brings trauma to her. In the US, Bela feels isolated and finds it challenging to be acculturated in the foreign land. Her setback is multiplied when she faces divorce from her husband, Sanjay. Her confusion and trauma due to the dilemma of holding Indian identity or being assimilated into the new culture in a foreign country reflect a kind of identity confusion in the post-colonial sense (Bhabha, 1994). Her trauma of silence and daily emotional struggles also affect her daughter, Tara, who feels disconnected from her roots and confused about where she belongs. Bela is confused about her identity.

Tara, the daughter of Bela, was born in Houston, USA, and she grew up there, far away from her ancestral home, and was almost less knowledgeable about her Bengali heritage. She leaves college, switches between jobs, and has unstable relationships. She seems completely confused and cut off from her parental heritage. All these confusions and chaos trigger her trauma. Her lack of knowledge about her family's history and culture further aggravates this. She feels a fractured identity. Lack of her identity and any hope in life reflects the trauma of second-generation migrants who feel caught between two cultures, belonging to neither (Hall, 1990).

Throughout the novel, Divakaruni shows various characters' pain and suffering through storytelling. She enlightens us about the intergenerational trauma that runs across generations. Each of her female characters reflects their life, memories, and difficulties in dealing with the challenges, which are different for all the characters.

#### Theoretical Framework

In this article, we use Hélène Cixous's concept of *écriture féminine* to analyse various characters from a feminist perspective. *Écriture féminine* is a specific form of writing that questions patriarchal societal norms, language, and structures. Cixous (1976) emphasises the role of women in reimagining and reclaiming their narratives through women's writing that narrates women's experiences from their perspective. Additionally, as Divakaruni narrates the characters' story through diasporic elements that are influenced and shaped by colonial history. Applying postcolonial theory helps examine how colonial histories and cultural displacements influence identity formation and resistance in the diaspora context (Bhabha, 1994).

#### Character Analysis

From the feminist analysis perspective, the novel mainly explores the three characters representing the struggles and journeys of three generations of women.

**Sabitri:** Sabitri's journey can be seen at the crossroads of her traditional duties and personal aspirations. Her success as a businessperson challenges the patriarchal mindset of society in Cixous's notion of rewriting one's destiny through feminine agency.

**Bela:** Bela's decision to emigrate and marry Sanjay against

her mother's wishes signifies a protest against the patriarchal norms. Her divorce is seen as an early break against the dependence of women on their husbands. Through her story, the novel portrays theme of self-liberation and the complexities of identity in the diaspora.

**Tara:** Tara's personal experiences with motherhood and her relationship with her daughter demonstrate generational transmission of trauma. Her personal experiences highlight the dilemma of balancing personal desires and sociocultural and societal expectations as placed upon her as an Indo-American woman.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Narrative Structure And Cultural Intersections

In the novel, Divakaruni artfully and elegantly employs a non-linear narrative structure that tells the tales of three women across different geographies. This allows clear picturisation and independent presentation of the stories of three different characters. The novel shifts across locations- first from rural Bengal to metropolitan Kolkata to Houston in the United States. This non-linear representation of the stories depicts the fragmented identity of diasporic characters. This novel depicts the isolated case of these three characters and represents a larger picture of immigrant families' experiences of memories, identities, and histories. The non-linear representations realistically present the issues of migrants who often face such challenges outside of strict chronological orders (Brazziel & Mannur, 2003). In other words, this particular technique of story narration realistically depicts the fragmented experiences of the diaspora, where experiences, identities, and memories are always in flux and not in a particular chronology.

### Trauma Of Betrayal, Displacement, And Personal Choices

This novel, besides presenting the feminist elements as per Cixous's concept, also presents diverse forms of trauma that these characters face. It begins with Sabitri's betrayal and breach of trust by her lover Rajiv. After her relationship and subsequent betrayal by her lover went public, she was expelled from the house by her landlady. This led to shame and social fall of Sabitri. This event depicts how a society looks at relationships and betrayal. Women are at the receiving end. A society expects purity of women in terms of their sexuality. This incident left an indelible imprint on Sabitri's life. She underwent humiliation and psychological trauma because of this ordeal. Her incident depicts how cultural norms inflict long-term psychological damage on women who step outside traditional roles (Caruth, 1996).

Sabitri's trauma is not confined to herself. It is reflected in her behaviour towards her daughter, Bela. Sabitri disallows Bela to have a love relationship, which might be to safeguard her from future repercussions. But this trauma of mother transcends to her daughter, to a level that she chooses to leave the country for her lover. This is a form of intergenerational trauma, where past experiences are unconsciously inherited by the next generation, thus affecting their relationships as well (Hirsch, 2008). This can also be considered as a protective response to personal trauma, because what she faced as a young lady, she does not want her daughter to suffer, if she also faces betrayal.

Bela's rebellion against her mother and subsequent emigration to the US and then marrying her lover can be considered as a trauma, because she is exposed to a new culture with new norms, and different atmosphere. Here she faces a new form of trauma due to cultural dislocation, emotional abandonment by her husband, and isolation by the native society as an immigrant. This situation represents in-betweenness hybridity and unhomeliness (Bhabha 1994).

Tara, the daughter of Bela, who grows up in the US also inherits

the legacy of intergenerational trauma through her mother from grandmother. Her confusion about her cultural roots and identity reflects unspoken pain across generations (Hall, 1990; Hirsch, 2008).

### Resistance And Empowerment

In the novel, *Before We Visit the Goddess*, Devakaruni explores the characters' intricate connections and defiant responses across generations against the mainstream patriarchal social norms. These personal choices taken as defiances against the dominant men-centred social norms later shape their identity and lives. All the central female characters of the novel almost unequivocally challenge these dominant norms and break the status quo, though in their own ways, as deemed fit, as per the demand of the situation. For example, Sabitri, after being abandoned by her lover, breaks the status quo and treads the path of entrepreneurship. Her venture of a sweetshop turns out to be a great success. This was not an easy decision at that time. In a way, this venture of Sabitri can also be seen as an anti-status quo because women's financial independence and their involvement in business matters was not too prevalent. Her grit and unweaving determination to succeed in her own venture signifies Hélène Cixous's concept of *écriture féminine*, which advocates for women's self independence and expression of their lived experiences and requiring their identities through not only narratives, but also actions (Cixous, 1976). In Cixous's terms, her character reflects economic independence and emotional endurance, and illustrates Cixous' notions of writing one's history and existence.

Bela, daughter of Sabitri, also demonstrates resistance against patriarchal control of women in the Indian society, first when she leaves the country to marry her love against her mother's wishes and then by divorcing her husband in the United States. However, these actions would negatively affect Bela in her later years. Her divorce and single motherhood were stigmatised in the Indian society in those days (Sharma & Mehta, 2023). This novel, therefore, not only presents the divorce as a personal choice of Bela but also a more significant issue of Indian society that expects women to rescue failed and abusive marriages. Even if marriages fail, women are expected to keep mum and compromise for the sake of the family. This shows a gender specific role of women in Indian society. Therefore, this portrayal also depicts a more significant cultural issue of Indian society.

Tara, the third generation of woman, further contributes to this resistance against patriarchy. She is a second-generation Indian-American who fights cultural issues, including identity, in her personal life. For example, she drops out of college and does not have a clear career or academic path. She also divorces and chooses liberation over domesticity. This can also be seen as a powerful resistance against standard norms. As rightly pointed out by feminist scholar Gayatri Spivak in her work *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, postcolonial, subaltern and marginalised subjects often inhabit contradictory spaces where silence, ambiguity or resistance against expected norms may carry radical meaning (Spivak, 1988). In Spivak's terms, Tara's refusal to take up expected duties or remaining silent could be considered 'strategic existentialism'. In a society where the worth of women is considered based on their productivity, child birth, and child care and familial care, her act of not participating in these set societal norms can be considered a radical gesture.

All these narratives of the three generations align with Cixous's concept of *écriture féminine*, which emphasises the reclamation of one's own stories and challenging the traditional gender roles.

## CONCLUSIONS

In *Before We Visit the Goddess*, Divakaruni presents a

remarkably nuanced portrayal of female characters within the context of the Indian diaspora, highlighting their struggles, eventually leading to traumatic experiences and their intergenerational traumas across generations. She presents several themes such as identity, migration, and gender. Through a trauma, feminist and postcolonial lens, the novel highlights the importance of resistance and self-reclamation of personal narratives. Analysing Divakaruni's novel, one can get a deeper understanding of the complexities of diaspora identities, their impact on trauma and the resilience of women in rewriting their narratives.

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